

DRAFT Environmental Assessment

Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area Addition

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 2 – Missoula

September 2011



Elk on the Proposed 68-Acre Addition to Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Proposed Action and Need

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to accept the donation of fee-title ownership of approximately 68 acres adjoining Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ravalli County, northeast of Hamilton. Calf Creek WMA was acquired by FWP for elk winter range in 1960, and currently consists of 2,333 acres. The proposed 68-acre addition shares almost ½-mile of common boundary with the WMA, and would add a ¼-mile buffer from adjoining developed and further developable private lands (Figures 1-4). This donation is offered by Ms Christopher Young, the owner of the subject parcel, with the intent that the gift be accomplished by the end of 2011.

The 68-acre addition contains an FWP access right-of-way to the WMA, which FWP has been using for motorized administrative access. (Public access to the WMA is non-motorized from a separate parking area.) Aside from the road, power, telephone and water well, there are no other improvements on the property, and it is practically nonforested. FWP currently maintains the fence between the two properties and would simply transfer that effort to the new boundary upon acquisition. The primary benefit of acquiring this property would be to protect the elk winter range from possible future subdivision and/or development, and offer additional public access. The property would be open to non-motorized access from April 15 through December 1, and subject to the same regulations currently in effect across all of Calf Creek WMA.

1.2 Objectives of the Proposed Action

- To block up the ownership perimeter of Calf Creek WMA,
- To prevent future subdivision and development or other activities that would displace elk from their winter range, and
- To improve public access in spring, summer and fall.

1.3 Location

Calf Creek WMA and the subject 68 acres lie approximately 7 miles east of Hamilton, at the end of Hamilton Heights Road, in Ravalli County, Montana (Figures 1 and 2).

Legal Description of Subject Parcel (general terms):

Ravalli County: T6N, R19W Sections 18 W1/2NE (Figure 2)

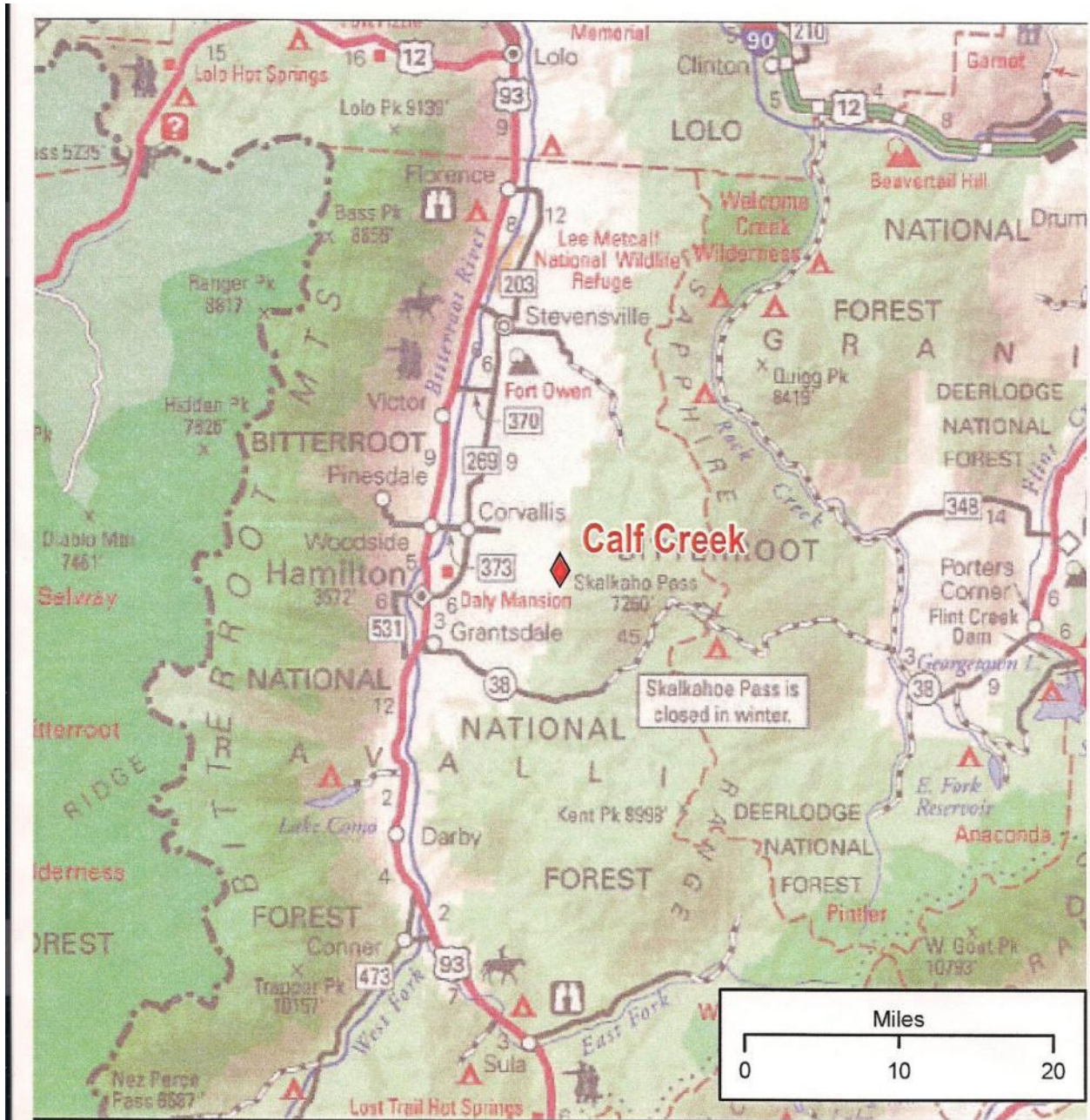


Figure 1. General location of Calf Creek WMA.

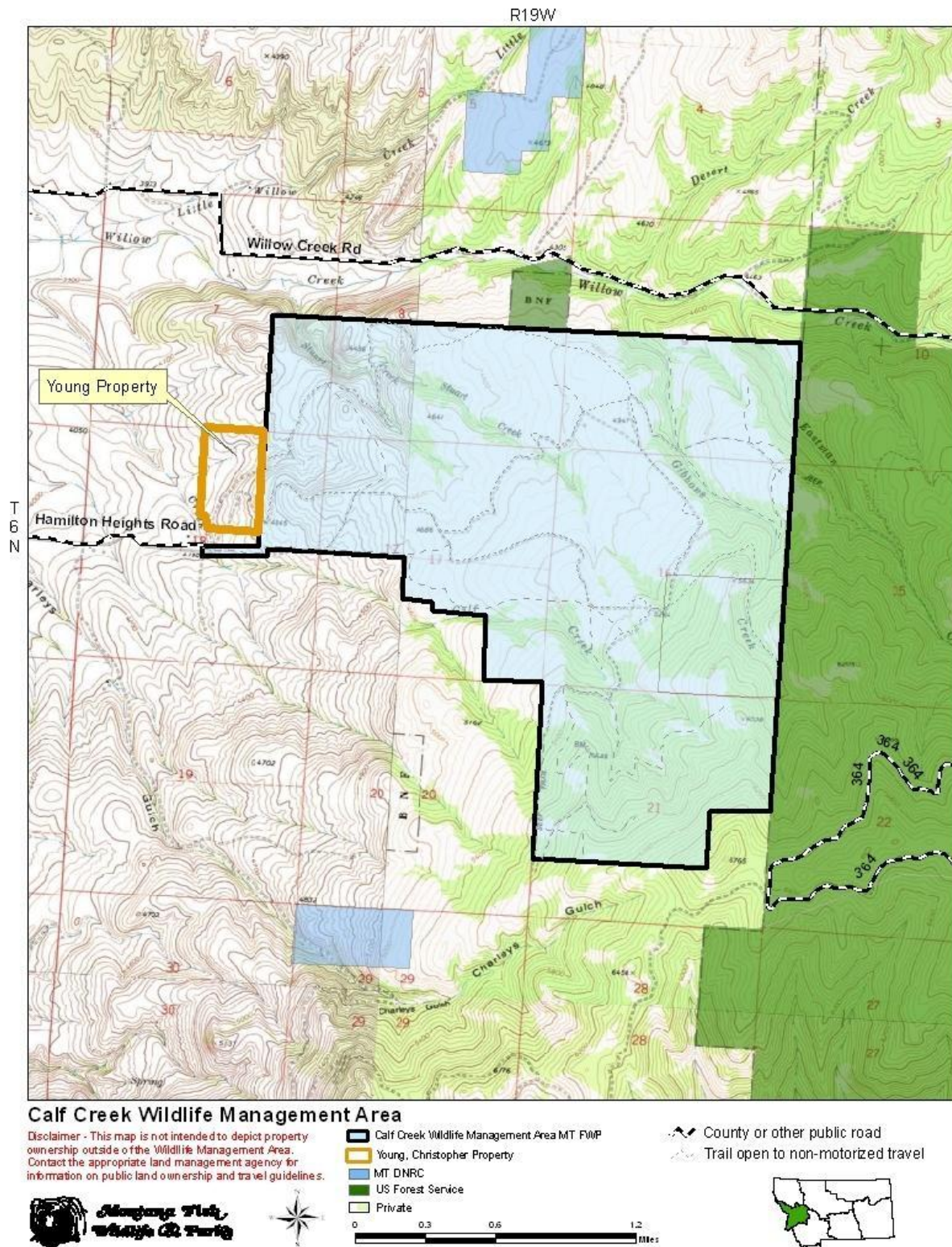


Figure 2. Location of the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA.



Figure 3. View of the northeast corner and approximate north boundary (drawn in yellow) of the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA, showing the dry coulees on the property. The WMA west boundary fence is in the foreground, running northward toward the top of the photograph.



1.5 Authority and Responsibility

FWP has the authority to purchase lands that are suitable for game, bird, fish or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation, per Montana statute Section 87-1-209, Montana Code Annotated (MCA).

FWP is also required to establish a maintenance account for property acquisitions (87-1-209 and 23-1-127 (2) MCA). Such an account would be used to for weed maintenance, fence installation or repair of existing fences, garbage removal, implementation of safety and health measures required by law to protect the public, erosion control, streambank stabilization, erection of barriers to preserve riparian vegetation and habitat, and planting of native trees, grasses, and shrubs for habitat stabilization. Such maintenance activities should be consistent with the Good

Neighbor policy. In the case of the proposed acceptance of a land donation, the donation would not trigger a deposit of funds into this particular maintenance account. However, funds from this and other FWP funding accounts would be available for the maintenance of this property, as also provided for the existing Calf Creek WMA.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action: FWP would accept the donation of approximately 68 acres via fee title

FWP proposes to accept the donation of fee-title ownership of approximately 68 acres adjoining Calf Creek WMA in Ravalli County, northeast of Hamilton. The proposed 68-acre addition shares almost ½-mile of common boundary with the WMA (Figure 2), and would add a ¼-mile buffer from adjoining developed and further developable private lands (Figure 5). This donation is offered by Ms. Christopher Young, the owner of the subject parcel, with the intent that the gift be accomplished by the end of 2011.

The 68-acre addition contains an FWP access right-of-way to the WMA (Figure 6). (Public access is non-motorized from a separate parking area.) The existence of a well, irrigation water rights, power and telephone make the Young property desirable for development.

FWP would manage the property in accordance with the existing Management Plan for Calf Creek WMA (Appendix A). FWP currently maintains the fence between the two properties, and would simply transfer that effort to the new boundary upon acquisition. The primary benefit of acquiring this property would be to protect the elk winter range from possible future subdivision and/or development, and offer improved public access. The property would be open to non-motorized access from April 15 through December 1 and subject to the same regulations currently in effect across all of Calf Creek WMA.

2.2 Alternative B – No Action: FWP would not accept the donation of approximately 68 acres

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not accept the 68-acre property. We do not presume to know the landowner's response in terms of future land ownership and land management, but future sale, subdivision and development would be more likely than under the proposed action. The existence of a well, irrigation water rights, power and telephone make this property desirable for development.

2.3 Alternative Considered but Eliminated from Further Analysis: FWP purchasing a Conservation Easement

This alternative was eliminated from further consideration because the landowner desires to donate the fee-title to FWP and is not interested in continuing to own the property or sell to someone else.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND PREDICTED CONSEQUENCES

3.1 LAND USE

The private landowner has occasionally pastured livestock on the property. The 68-acre addition contains the primary administrative access road to the WMA, which is gated and locked. Public access to the property has been at the discretion of the private landowner. Aside from the road, power, telephone, and water well, there are no other improvements on the property, and it is practically nonforested. At this writing, FWP does not know whether the surface and mineral estates are intact. A minerals remoteness evaluation has been commissioned to determine the likelihood of mineral development.

Proposed Action: FWP would add the 68-acre donation to Calf Creek WMA and manage it as it currently manages the rest of the WMA. Public access would be nonmotorized, and open from April 15 through December 1. Calf Creek WMA is closed to all public access from December 2 through April 14 to provide elk undisturbed access to their winter range.

Any mineral interests owned by the landowner and attached to the parcel would be transferred to FWP. Final determination of those interests is pending. Water rights attached to the project property would also be transferred to FWP.

FWP would not graze livestock on the property, and would reserve the forage for wintering wildlife.

FWP would install appropriate informational signage at the main access point to the property to communicate property boundaries, FWP regulations, and general site information.

FWP's purchase of this property would prevent future subdivision or development of the site that could degrade wildlife habitat and limit public access to and through the property.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, we do not presume to know the landowner's response in terms of future land ownership and land management, but future sale, subdivision and development would be more likely than under the proposed action. The existence of a well, irrigation water rights, power and telephone make this property desirable for development. Parcels adjoining the 68-acre parcel to the north, west, and south have been developed into residential sites (Figure 5). Public access would continue to be at the discretion of the private landowner.

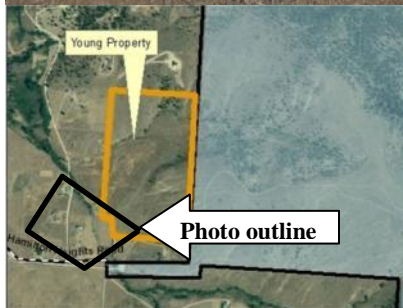


Figure 5. View along the south boundary fence to the southwest corner (drawn in yellow) of the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA, showing the level of subdivision development characteristic of private properties neighboring to the south, west and north.



Figure 6. Gate and FWP road right-of-way into the 68-acre parcel.

3.2 VEGETATION

The 68-acre parcel is an extension of the shrub-grassland habitat of the adjacent Calf Creek WMA, and it is practically nonforested. The property is gently to moderately sloping and generally southwest-facing. Vegetation is comprised of native and non-native species, including bluebunch wheatgrass, junegrass, bluegrasses, big sagebrush, rubber rabbitbrush, and spotted knapweed. Grass/shrub ground cover approached 100 percent in the wet growing season of 2011 (Figure 7), in a condition similar to the adjacent WMA (Figure 8). Dry coulees support scattered ponderosa pine, chokecherry and serviceberry (Figure 3).



Figure 7. Grass/shrub cover in August 2011 across the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA.

Proposed Action: Succession of native grasses would continue toward a climax condition under FWP management, which would eventually increase amounts of bluebunch wheatgrass (a preferred elk winter forage). Relatively dense ground cover would favor nesting birds such as meadowlarks and vesper sparrows.

FWP would complete a vegetation assessment and a weed inspection per 7-22-2154(1) MCA, which requires nonfederal government agencies to obtain a weed inspection by the county weed district and requires the development of a weed management plan to ensure compliance with district noxious weed management programs. Through the implementation of FWP's 2008 Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan (available at <http://fwp.mt.gov/content/getItem.aspx?id=32626>), FWP would comply with district programs and develop the property's weed management plan in the fall of 2011.

FWP anticipates a decrease in noxious weeds and an improvement in overall habitat health over time after the Plan's implementation. Following this plan, FWP would actively treat weeds through the use of herbicides and biological control agents.



Figure 8. Fenceline contrast along the west boundary of Calf Creek WMA, showing similar vegetation composition and cover on the proposed 68-acre addition. The foot/horse path is on the WMA in both photographs.

No Action: If FWP does not purchase the property, it is difficult to predict how new ownership would affect existing vegetation and wildlife habitat resources since future landowner activities are unknown.

3.3 WILDLIFE SPECIES

Calf Creek WMA is winter range for about 200 elk that occasionally use the proposed 68-acre addition, particularly in hard winters. White-tailed deer occur year-round. Black bear, cougar and coyote round out the common occurrences of large mammals. Game birds include ruffed grouse, dusky grouse, and occasionally Hungarian partridge.

Some limited small mammal, amphibian, and reptile surveys were done on the Calf Creek WMA in 2006. No formal bird surveys have been done in this area, but some information can be inferred from other incidental observations and bird surveys in the Bitterroot Valley.

The proposed 68-acre addition to the WMA provides habitat for a variety of grassland songbirds. Species documented on or near the parcel, or likely to be found there, include western

meadowlark, vesper sparrow, savannah sparrow, mountain bluebird, Wilson's snipe, gray partridge, and eastern kingbird. The parcel provides good foraging habitat for birds of prey. Raptor species documented in the area include golden eagle, American kestrel, and red-tailed hawk. Other raptor species that probably use the area for foraging include rough-legged hawk, prairie falcon, and northern harrier.

The parcel provides habitat that may support several species of concern. Western skink and Preble's shrew have been documented in similar habitat nearby on the Calf Creek WMA. Other species of concern or potential species of concern that use similar habitat in the Bitterroot Valley include grasshopper sparrow, Brewer's sparrow, common poorwill, and Idaho pocket gopher.

Proposed Action: The donation of the 68-acre parcel to FWP would conserve its existing contribution to the larger landscape of wildlife habitat represented by Calf Creek WMA.

No Action: If no action were taken by FWP, the possibility would exist for the property to be sold, subdivided and/or developed in the future, and the habitat provided by this 68 acres would be degraded or lost. The existence of a well, irrigation water rights, power and telephone make this property desirable for development.

3.4 FISHERIES AND AQUATIC RESOURCES

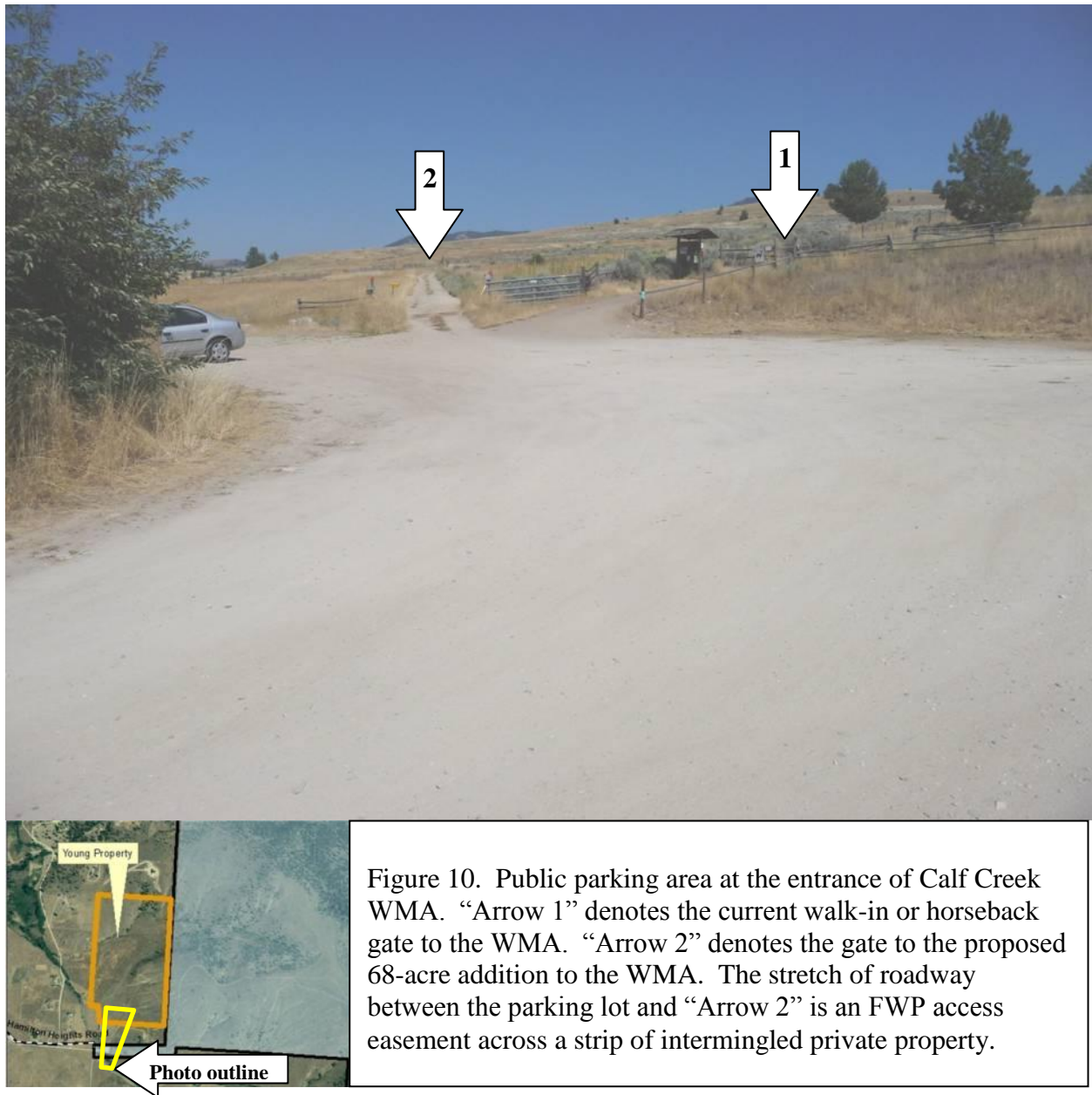
There are no fisheries or aquatic resources on the 68-acre parcel. The mouths of two draws cross the property and would naturally connect with Calf Creek. However, that connection is now blocked by a berm on neighboring private land (Figure 9). Calf Creek itself does not cross the parcel.



Figure 9. Berm in dry coulee on neighboring private land, abutting the west boundary of the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA, which blocks its connection with Calf Creek.

3.5 Aesthetics and Recreation Opportunities

Calf Creek WMA supports significant public hunting for elk and white-tailed deer. Hunting is by foot or horseback from a large parking area at the lowest elevation of the WMA (Figure 10). Or, hunters access the WMA from the Bitterroot National Forest (Figure 2) or Charlie's Gulch Block Management Area and hunt down across the WMA to the parking lot. The parking area is filled with hunter vehicles (many with horse trailers) on most weekend mornings of the general big game hunting season.



Calf Creek WMA also is noted for horseback riding opportunities during late-spring, summer and early fall. Seldom is the parking lot empty of vehicles with horse trailers from April 15 through the first half of October. The Bitterroot Backcountry Horsemen and Bitterroot Saddle Tramps have been valued cooperators in the design, development and upkeep of the parking area and trails.

Calf Creek WMA serves as an important outdoor classroom for local schools. The Classroom Without Walls Program at Corvallis High School has used the WMA and collaborated with FWP biologists for many years, contributing useful knowledge about wildlife use of the property, and video products for outreach to parents and others in the community. The WMA also supports test plots administered by the Montana Agricultural Experiment Station, serving weed

researchers based in Corvallis and Bozeman. Hikers and runners round out the major recreational users of the WMA during spring, summer and fall.

The 68-acre parcel contributes substantially to the existing recreational experience at Calf Creek WMA. At present, only one private residence is accessed across the WMA parking area (Figure 10), which limits the level of residential traffic disturbance affecting WMA users while loading and unloading horses or otherwise gathering in the parking area. Similarly, only one house closely abuts the WMA (which lies outside and to the right of the photo in Figure 10), slightly affecting shooting angles and other aspects of the recreational experience on the WMA.

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action, current public access and recreational opportunities would be maintained and enhanced. Public access and recreation upon the proposed 68-acre addition to Calf Creek WMA would be allowed under the rules and regulations governing public use on the adjoining WMA. Of note, all public access would be by nonmotorized means, and the WMA is closed from December 2 through April 14.

FWP would allow the public to travel by foot or bicycle upon the road crossing private land between the existing WMA parking area and the 68-acre parcel (Figure 10), thereby establishing a new loop trail from the parking area. FWP retains an access easement for the public upon that road, which served as the main public access road to the WMA from 1960 until FWP revised the WMA travel plan in 1998. The public would be required to remain on the road where it crosses about 200 yards of private property between the parking area and the 68-acre parcel. FWP would install gates to accommodate foot and bicycle passage through fences and around cattle guards.

The new access to and upon the 68-acre addition would improve accessibility to Calf Creek WMA for people who cannot make the uphill climb from the parking lot on the existing public trail. The new access is on relatively flat ground (Figure 10) and may improve the opportunity for disabled or other people to walk on the WMA.

No Action: If the proposed 68-acre donation is not accepted, public access to that parcel will remain at the discretion of the private landowner. The possibly would exist for future owners to develop the property and deliver additional traffic across the WMA parking area, increasing the potential for conflicts with WMA users, particularly those who are loading and unloading horses.

3.6 Cultural & Historical Resources

FWP is unaware of any specific cultural sites on the 68-acre parcel, and does not propose to introduce land uses that would diminish or destroy cultural resources.

Proposed Action: FWP's land management activities would be to minimize soil disturbance overall. Maintenance activities would be largely confined to existing fencelines and the developed roadway.

No Action: Future development of this property, which would lead to increased soil disturbance and the possible damage of any cultural resources, would remain a possibility if FWP does not accept the donation of this property.

3.7 Community and Taxes

FWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 to pay “to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen.”

The public recreation provided on the proposed 68-acre addition to the WMA would benefit WMA users. This recreation might introduce public activity near neighboring properties.

Proposed Action: FWP would pay taxes to Ravalli County in the amount that would be paid by any private landowner.

The increased public access that would be provided on the 68-acre parcel would benefit the public primarily as a matter of convenience, offering an alternative route or loop through the WMA from the existing parking area. The 68 acres is not expected to attract public recreation broadly, and most traffic upon the parcel would be on the existing FWP road easement. Neighboring landowners may notice a minor increase in recreationists near their property lines. The opening of this access route to the public would redirect some existing recreation traffic farther away from the residence that is located above the northeast corner of the parking area, and FWP would work with this landowner by providing signage to help the public avoid straying onto his driveway. It is unlikely that this access would attract new visitation and use to Calf Creek WMA.

No Action: If the property were sold and developed, tax revenues paid to the County could be higher than current levels. County expenditures for providing services to the development on this parcel could be higher as well. Predicting the final use of the property and exact tax consequences if owned by another party(s) is difficult to assess.

If the property were sold and developed, human activity around neighboring properties would increase, and the existing viewshed would be compromised.

4.0 RESOURCE ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) provides for the identification and elimination from detailed study of issues, which are not significant or which have been covered by a prior environmental review, narrowing the discussion of these issues to a brief presentation of why they will not have a significant effect on the physical or human environment or providing a reference to their coverage elsewhere (Administrative Rules of Montana 12.2.434(d)). While these resources are important, they were either unaffected or mildly affected by the proposed action, or the effects could be adequately mitigated.

A few issues were found not to be significant to the decision and were eliminated from further detailed analysis.

4.1 Soils

The subject property does not contain prime and unique or important farmlands, and FWP generally would not disturb native vegetation or soils other than for road maintenance or boundary fencing.

4.2 Air Quality

Under either alternative, there are unlikely to be changes to the ambient air quality since neither FWP nor the current landowner plan any construction or development activities that could affect particulate levels and air quality.

4.3 Noise and Electrical Effects

FWP foresees a low likelihood that noise levels would increase under either alternative because neither FWP nor most private landowners would be served by activities that introduce significant noise in this location.

Existing electrical structures and easements would not be affected by either alternative.

4.4 Risk and Health Hazards

As part of FWP's due diligence, the Department would complete a hazardous materials survey prior to the property's acquisition. No hazardous materials are known to occur on the parcel at this time.

4.5 Cumulative Impacts

Proposed Action: FWP's acceptance of the proposed 68-acre donation would maintain and eventually enhance the existing habitat and open space that the property has contributed historically. Public access to this property would enhance the existing recreational experience on Calf Creek WMA by providing alternative access to and from the parking area. These contributions would offset a minor portion of the cumulative loss of habitat and public access that has occurred and continues in Ravalli County and across the West.

No Action: If no action were taken, the 68-acre parcel might someday be sold, subdivided and/or developed. The existence of a well, irrigation water rights, power and telephone make this property desirable for development. The effects of human disturbances associated with development could spill over onto the adjacent WMA in terms of wildlife displacement. The cumulative impact of such development would be minor on a landscape scale, due to the small size of the parcel and the existing buffer of Calf Creek WMA and the adjoining Bitterroot National Forest.

The greatest degree of cumulative impact would be felt by FWP as an agency if the 68-acre parcel were subdivided and developed. Each development around the borders of a WMA adds the potential for numerous residential contacts and occasional or chronic conflicts, which

consume the limited FWP time and staff available to address them. The possible future development of this 68 acres—with FWP’s administrative access right-of-way running through it, with the access road to the 68 acres running across the WMA parking area, and with homes potentially situated along the WMA boundary—would add a moderate cumulative impact to FWP’s Habitat Montana Program, and detract from FWP’s ability to manage critical wildlife habitat in west-central Montana.

5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No. Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts from the proposed acquisition and subsequent management of the property by FWP, an EIS is not required, and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

6.1 Public Involvement

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this Draft EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- One statewide press release;
- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Ravalli Republic*, *Bitterroot Star*, *Missoulian*, and *Helena Independent Record*;
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice and posting the EA on the FWP web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region 2 Headquarters in Missoula, and on the FWP web site.

A public meeting is scheduled for September 28th, Wednesday, at 7:00 p.m. at the US Forest Service headquarters (1801 N 1st Street) in Hamilton to provide the public a venue to submit comments and have questions answered by FWP staff. This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few and limited physical and human impacts.

6.2 Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Wildlife and Fisheries Division

Lands Bureau

Legal Unit

Strategic Planning & Data Services

Montana Natural Heritage Program

6.3 Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days beginning September 12, 2011. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m. on October 11, 2011 and can be mailed to the address below:

Calf Creek WMA Addition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Headquarters
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804
406-542-5540

or email comments to: shrose@mt.gov

6.4 Anticipated Timeline of Events

Submission of Project to the FWP Commission	November 2011
Submission of Project to the Montana Land Board	November 2011
Closing, if Approved	December 2011

7.0 EA PREPARATION

Mike Thompson, FWP Regional Wildlife Manager, Missoula, MT
Candice Durran, FWP Land Agent, Helena, MT
David Dziak, FWP Wildlife Management Areas Manager, Warm Springs, MT
Craig Jourdonnais, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Hamilton, MT
Kristi Dubois, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Missoula, MT
Sharon Rose, FWP Administrative Assistant, Missoula, MT
Robert Nelson, FWP Conservation Technician, Missoula, MT

APPENDICES

- A. Draft Addition to Calf Creek WMA Management Plan (separate document)
- B. FWP Socio-Economic Report (separate document)